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ABSTRACT

The task of humanizing Shakespeare for high school seniors is not simple but may be done in a variety of ways, all intended to arouse student interest, curiosity, respect, and fondness for the Bard. Gimmicks such as bulletin board signs, pictures, maps, charts, and writings attract attention, as do letters to local newspapers reporting informally the Shakespeare class or club activities, always treating the playwright as a contemporary friend. Each term's selection of plays for study depends on the Shakespeare schedules of several theatrical companies so that a number of plays may be seen on stage (by bus travel to the theater location) or on television. Also effective are student references to both critical works and humorous literature about Shakespeare, informal discussions in class or on buses en route to or from plays, listening to records, viewing filmstrips or movies, and acting in class or for special assemblies. In addition, the Folger Shakespeare Library's "Newsletter" and "The Shakespeare Newsletter" from Kent State University also help students to become enthusiastically familiar with Shakespeare. (JM)

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HUMANIZING SHAKESPEARE

by

Abraham Bernstein*

"Totus mundus agit histrionem." Yes, "All the world is a stage" seems to be applicable to my 20-week Shakespeare elective course where this Latin motto is printed in bold letters on the wall over my desk.

Newcomers stop and stare at it while trying to figure out its translation. Only when we do As You Like It and come to Jacques' speech do these lines register fully. This sign is not the only gimmick to arouse curiosity and awaken interest in the study of Shakespeare and his plays. So are the constant changing of pictures, posters, drawings, writings, maps, and charts -- in fact, all the miscellanea on every possible wall and bulletin board.

From term to term the room appears to be assuming an increasingly definite atmosphere purposely designed to attract and intrigue incoming students, and at the same time, the paraphernalia scattered in strategic locations are so associated with Shakespeare that you can almost reach out and feel him there in all his greatness, brilliance, and warmth.

Yet, this is no simple task, humanizing Shakespeare -- the principal dramatist of all time -- to today's high school seniors, when to be realistic, I know some of the "unseasoned, unpurified, or unindoctrinated" frowningly begin this course in a fit of doubt or in an air of schoolboy melancholy, and even

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*Of Binghamton Central High School. This paper was presented at the Annual Conference of the New York State English Council in Binghamton, New York, May 4, 1974.

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in a mood polemically disheartening. Unfortunately, I do not own Merlin's wand; nor do I have a pocket full of magic formulas. I depend mostly on engendering their curiosity and interest by their emulation of my fondness for the Bard. Everything I say and do pertains to friend William.

I find myself being asked by my colleagues who also present Shakespeare in their yearly lit courses (which, by necessity, include the teaching of many other strands of English) for suggestions and for the use of various teaching aids on the Bard. I am very happy to comply with such requests because sharing material and ideas leads to a wider awareness, appreciation, and a more assured promotion of present and future teaching of Shakespeare. Indeed, it is pleasant to think that in due time underclassmen in these English classes will eventually become members of the Shakespeare elective.

I never refer to Shakespeare as Mr. William Shakespeare. In my effort to humanize him, I often refer to Shakespeare as one might to a friend. As an example of this subtle means to catch my students' attention, I frequently write on local Shakespeare doings to the Letters to the Editor Section of Binghamton's two newspapers, <u>The Evening Press</u> and <u>The Sun-Bulletin</u>. Note the familiarity in the excerpts of these letters:

> "To the Editor, <u>The Sun-Bulletin</u>:
>
> Friend William Shakespeare would have been proud of the unusual sights and sounds recently taking place at 5:45 - 6:00 A.M. in front of the darkened educational institution at 31 Main Street, Binghamton, as well as later in the town of Woodstock, New York.

> In the chilly, sun-less hour, a group of some thirty sleepy-eyed but cheerfully chatty Central youngsters huddled together waiting for a chartered bus which would transport them to Woodstock to see a Shakespeare play with curtain time scheduled at 10:30 A.M.
>
> Soon we were on our way, galloping along happily, thinking and talking about friend William in usual exciting anticipation. Did it matter to us which play we were traveling three hours of highway at such a weary hour to see? No, not really . . .
>
> Luckily, we arrived early enough to walk about this quaint art colony and partake of fresh coffee and buns . . . After the play, I visualized discussions about the play Julius Caesar on the ride back . . . I passed a notebook and pen to the first boy on the bus who, after jotting down his reactions to the play, the trip, or on anything he wished, in turn gave it to his neighbor. And so on, until the last one on the bus had noted his thoughts . . . How discerning were their young remarks! . . .
>
> One chap wrote: "It was an education-fun day!" What else is desired from our youth than a relaxed congeniality while experiencing learning from Shakespeare? . . .
>
> Through the transcendent worldliness of our steadfast friend, the British Bard, . . . I play a dual role -- teacher and Shakespeare trip planner . . ."

In another letter about a trip to Joseph Papp's production of The Tempest at Lincoln Center, New York City, in part I wrote:

> ". . . Admittedly, all on the bus were not "sold" on friend William, even though the majority were. As for the yet unseasoned, grumbling ones (brought along for initiation reasons), they were not fully convinced that they had made the right decision in giving up a Sunday to travel back and forth on the same day

> just to see "this thing of Shakespeare's." And not to do it on a school day, at that!
>
> Ah, but little did they know what plans were in the offing to break through their 10-foot wall of impassiveness. To make the dent required more time, effort, tact, and a Joseph Papp production.
>
> On return we leafed through the text, now assuming a third dimension quality of vividness and familiarity, and when out of the immortal pages, Ariel leaped about in response to Prospero's commands, Prince Ferdinand caressed fair, fragile Miranda to his breast, Trinculo giggled like a "pied ninny," and the storm roared on in clapping thunder and crackling lightning streaks, the miracle happened: the conversion, the final acceptance of Shakespeare. Habitually, then, friend William winked and nodded approvingly at the success of another strategy."

As can be gathered from the letters, "my kids" are taken on bus trips to see current Shakespeare productions, usually at the American Shakespeare Festival Theatre at Stratford, Connecticut; the National Shakespeare Company at Woodstock, New York; Joseph Papp's Lincoln Center in New York City, and to local college campuses (SUNY, Binghamton, and Broome Community College), and wherever else we can get to.

Since I use the G. B. Harrison text containing Shakespeare's complete works, the problem of ever ordering textual material is dispensed with. Everything needed is in one volume. In an instant we can turn to another play. Sometimes if we find one not going well, I might say, "Let's drop it for now. We'll come back to it later. What would you rather do?"

If someone cries out, <u>The Merry Wives of Windsor</u>!, well, why not?

Of course, I keep abreast with schedules from several theatrical companies and each year base my projected term's play selections on what we will attend. Last term included, for example, three stage versions of Hamlet (one in New York City by the Roundabout Theatre Company, another by the Department of Theater at SUNY, Binghamton, and the third, a TV presentation; Much Ado about Nothing, by Joseph Papp on TV; Winter's Tale at SUNY, Binghamton; and The Merry Wives of Windsor and Anthony and Cleopatra at Stratford, Connecticut).

Although this procedure can be exhausting, the unexpected offerings are exciting. It is a challenge to do plays seldom read in a high school course of study. I am, therefore, constantly kept "on my toes." Often I teach a play that I never studied fully, so I must "dig in" too.

I try different techniques. Here are a few tasks asked of the class: writing responses to provocative topics; referring to the critical works of masters of criticism on Shakespeare -- Samuel Johnson, Marchette Chute, Harold C. Goddard, Mark Van Doren, Maynard Mack, G. Wilson Knight, Derek Traversi, A. P. Rossiter, Anthony Burgess, Louis B. Wright, Caroline Spurgeon -- to name a selected few; discussing in an informal class circle issues derived from the plays; listening to records, viewing film strips and movies, acting in class and in the school auditorium in specially planned assemblies; making contemporary news stories on, say Macbeth, tying in with present times. Just the other day on completing Julius Caesar, a group composed a newspaper called The Forum Quarterly.

By contrast to show the surprised devotees that "I can

take it and they should, too." I turn to lighter literature, the spoofing on Shakespeare. For example, we laugh through James Thurber's "The Macbeth Murder Mystery," "Twisted Tales from Shakespeare," by Richard Armour, and Robert Benchley's "Looking Shakespeare Over."

Even to face the ageless question head-on whether or not it was Shakespeare who wrote the plays, I give the class copies of Richard Bentley's "Elizabethan Whodunit", which presents the facts concerning the identity of William Shakespeare and asks that the reader render his verdict. Was it Shakespeare? Francis Bacon? Christopher Marlowe? Needless to say, the moot court trial with presiding judge, lawyers, jury, defendant, witnesses, spectators, etc., provide a stormy session. The latest verdict? SHAKESPEARE WROTE THE PLAYS! THREE CHEERS FOR SHAKESPEARE!

When the spectacular Much Ado was shown on TV last season and again this April, my kids were told to sit glued to their TV set even though we were then involved with Twelfth Night and planning our annual Shakespeare Festival Program. Busy? Yes! Happy? Exorbitantly!

With audio-visual equipment, we can play back our stage performances. Doing this gives us hours of enlightenment with much ensuing laughter upon seeing ourselves as would-be Shakespearean actors, but sometimes we applaud someone's "great scene."

We're in touch with the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., and are on the mailing list of its "Newsletter". Then there is The Shakespeare Newsletter, issued every six weeks by Louis Marder at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio. Recently

we formed a much overdue Shakespeare Club and members will join the Students Shakespeare Guild and heavens knows what else!

*When Anthony Burgess, the eminent British novelist and Shakespeare scholar and lecturer, a few years ago while teaching at Princeton University, wrote in a New York Times article "... students enter [college] English departments knowing practically nothing about Shakespeare: something is wrong, evidently, in the high schools," my classes were affronted and urged me to defend our position. I did. They assisted me in presenting arguments in a lengthy letter to Mr. Burgess who later replied:

> "When I said what I did about Shakespeare in high schools, I was, I suppose, distilling at second hand what I had heard from so many professors and students ... I'm naturally delighted to hear of the trouble and imagination you lavish on the teaching of Shakespeare, and I was impressed by that schedule of approach ..."

On being asked to give a talk on Shakespeare at West Junior High School to eighth grade students, I replied, saying: "Yes, I'll be glad to come, but also with my Shakespeare group. They'll do scenes from Hamlet, Macbeth, and Romeo and Juliet. They can do their take-off on Julius Caesar called "Et Tuti Bruti!" What better way to present Shakespeare to youngsters than through their own enthusiastic peers? So much better than a formal address by me! "From the mouth of babes ..."

I have yet to go to Stratford, England, but will only make this journey accompanied by my boys and girls. I would

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*English Highlights, Scott, Foresman's News Periodical for 9th through 12th Grade English Teachers, March - April 1973, Vol. 29, No. 2. My Shakespeare class activities were written up in this issue and the Burgess affair is discussed.

not want to keep so much pleasure to myself; I want to enjoy their reactions along with my own. All I can say is that my kids and I are so steeped in the living world of Shakespeare that no wonder he is very much alive to us.

In short, whether we are reading together or separately, discussing a controversial point in question, doing assigned research, ironing out a program, arranging a bus trip, or just chatting on whatever is engrossing us at the moment, these "bard-o-philes" admit finding life with William absorbing. During mid-semester college breaks, year after year former student friends tell me that they felt well equipped in college to study Shakespeare. They blushingly recall earlier feelings on William.

The fact that Shakespeare is ever relevant, I frequently ask: How can Shakespeare be considered dead?

In a muted voice I usually answer that only his bodily remains have gone. We have his works which touch on every human aspect of man -- love, hate, fear, ambition, pity, remorse, jealousy, treason, betrayal, humor, or what you will.

How can such a writer be thought of as so much inhuman dust? In the words of his own analytical Hamlet, it can be said of William Shakespeare,

> "What a piece of work is [this] man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! . . ."

And so, in my soft approach and subtle handling of a man and his works, and in the deliberate hypnotic setting of Shakespeareana in my classroom where I reign as champion of the eternal genius, I invite, cajole, twist, and turn doubters into confirmed believers of none other than your friend and my friend "gentle Will."

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